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ABSTRACT

This concise report explores the issue of student reading motivation, and relates it to the use of the Accelerated Reader (AR) reading management program. The report discusses issues of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation, and notes that the points students earn for taking Accelerated Reader tests are not extrinsic rewards but simply a quantitative measure of reading practice. It outlines research on motivation which concludes that extrinsic motivators, rather than extinguishing intrinsic motivation, can actually enhance it. Further, it cautions against favoring intrinsic motivation, which can put children from non-mainstream cultural groups at a disadvantage. The report concludes by noting that the use of extrinsic rewards is not an essential part of AR, which provides learning information, but that this learning information can serve as important, tangible feedback that helps students discover an intrinsic love of reading. (SR)

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Toward a Balanced Approach to Reading Motivation:

Resolving the Intrinsic-Extrinsic Rewards Debate

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Introduction

This paper explores the use of the Accelerated Reader® (AR) reading management program in combination with rewards. AR itself is not a reading reward program: It is a task-level learning information system that provides quantitative information about student reading. Teachers and librarians can use this information in a variety of ways; many use it as the basis for extrinsic rewards, many others do not.

Research shows that properly designed reward programs enhance intrinsic motivation by providing positive feedback about student achievement. This can be especially important to disadvantaged students, because it helps them achieve educational equality. Clearly, the goal in education is for students to learn to love reading and become intrinsically motivated by the act of reading itself. It is ultimately the responsibility of the professional educator, having direct contact with the student, to choose those motivation techniques that will work best.

AR Points: Information and Motivation

The points students earn for taking Accelerated Reader tests are not extrinsic rewards. AR book points are simply a quantitative measure of reading practice. They provide students and teachers with feedback information about reading performance. Points serve as a crucial part of goal-setting and monitoring student progress. They can also be used as the basis of a reading incentive system. But computers do not reward people; people reward people. Accelerated Reader simply provides a source of information which can enhance the relationship between teachers and students in a variety of ways.

The decision about whether and how to use points, or other AR information like book reading level or percent correct, as part of an extrinsic reward program should be made by each teacher based on the needs of her students. Extrinsic rewards are by no means essential to reading motivation, but they can be a powerful tool, especially for students who need a "jump-start" to discover the love of books.

"Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic?"

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are often defined as opposites. Intrinsic motivation is the desire to do something for its own sake. Intrinsic motivation is said to come from within—it's the pleasure we get, for example, in doing something well or losing ourselves in a task. Extrinsic motivation is an incentive that is not part of the activity; it is motivation that comes from outside. All educators agree that intrinsic motivation is desirable and should be encouraged. The only issue is whether teachers should also use extrinsic rewards in addition. In the classroom, praise, gold stars, and grades can all be considered extrinsic motivators. Some theorists

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strongly object to using extrinsic rewards. They believe that if you reward a behavior like reading, the behavior will be extinguished as soon as the reward is removed. Instead, they believe that teachers should not use rewards at all and that students should be intrinsically motivated or not at all.

One proponent of this philosophy is Alfie Kohn, whose book, *Punished by Rewards* (1993), is often used as an authoritative reference on motivation. In Kohn's view, any attempt to encourage learning behavior through reward, or even praise, amounts to immoral coercion that dehumanizes the student. Kohn writes, "[W]hen we call out a hearty 'Good Girl!' in response to a child's performance, the most appropriate reply would seem to be 'Woof!'" (24). "A brief smile and a nod," he writes, "are just as controlling as a dollar bill" (31). Kohn's extreme position is an example of the distortions that result from a dogmatic approach to motivation. Clearly, a more balanced approach is called for.

What the Research Says

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation actually constitute a continuum. They relate so closely that they are almost inseparable. As Oldfather and Dahl (1995) have shown, intrinsic motivation originates in the learner's social experiences. Intrinsic motivators invariably relate to such external factors as socially reinforced values and the learner's desire to achieve some end in the material world. Similarly, extrinsic motivators usually involve the learner's drives, aspirations, and self-concept. As Cameron and Pierce demonstrated in their 1994 meta-analysis of 96 experimental studies of learning motivation, properly administered extrinsic motivators do not extinguish intrinsic motivation—in fact, they can actually enhance it. Their report concludes:

> "The present findings suggest that verbal praise and positive feedback enhance people's intrinsic interest . . . [W]hen praise and other forms of positive feedback are given and later removed, people continue to show intrinsic interest in their work. In contrast to recent claims made by Kohn (1993, p. 55), verbal praise is an extrinsic motivator that positively alters attitudes and behavior . . . Overall, the present review suggests that teachers have no reason to resist implementing incentive systems in the classroom."

In fact, the research about rewards confirms what classroom teachers have always known:

- Praise, hugs, and other tangible expressions of positive feedback are beneficial, not harmful.
- When properly used, rewards motivate students with no harmful effects.
- Rewards are particularly helpful at the beginning stages of skill development to jump-start a child's interest. Once a child becomes more expert at a skill, rewards are less necessary because the practice of the skill itself then becomes more intrinsically motivating.
- A balanced approach that includes such motivators as choice in book selection, self-determination, social interaction, modeling, and creative expression along with rewards engages the full range of student needs and interests.
- The professional, practicing educators who are closest to the situation should be given wide latitude to use the methods they judge to be most appropriate for their students.

Over a quarter-century of accumulated research provides little evidence that rewards decrease intrinsic motivation (Eisenberger and Cameron, 1996). In fact, as Linda Gambrell and Barbara Ann Marinak (1997) write,

> "When incentives are linked to the desired behavior and promote engagement in the desired behavior, motivation can become self-determined and can foster high-quality learning" (215).

Motivation and Social Justice

While it is certainly a desirable goal that children be intrinsically motivated, we should treat with caution the idea that *all* children ought to be motivated by a "natural" love of learning. As Shirley Brice Heath (1982) demonstrated in her study of learning at home and at school, families from different cultures have different ways of thinking about how children learn from adults. Because the teaching styles of mainstream, middle-class culture have so profoundly formed our school practices, we tend to assume that this style of learning is the only "natural" one. As a result, these cultural ideas form a set of invisible expectations about how to learn at school. Classroom practices that assume that these cultural expectations are "natural" for all students can put children from other cultural groups at a disadvantage.

Harvard researcher Lisa Delpit (1995) and educational theorist E. D. Hirsch (1996) have both suggested that favoring "intrinsic" motivation is an example of this phenomenon. Tangible rewards, they argue, can communicate to minority students the value that school places on literacy and provide immediate reinforcement of their success. The work of Dennis McInerney (1994) and Karsenti and Thibert (1995) showed that clear, tangible extrinsic goals were important factors in helping minority students develop strong learning motivation. Because minority children may need more explicit communication about scholastic expectations in order to compete effectively with students from the cultural mainstream, denying them this kind of feedback puts them at a real disadvantage. As Hirsch writes, "The idea that the motivation for academic achievement comes from within is one of the greatest barriers to social justice imaginable" (214).

Conclusion

The use of extrinsic rewards is not an essential part of Accelerated Reader use. AR provides learning information, which teachers can use in a variety of ways, including reading incentive programs. Such programs, while not the only way to motivate student reading, can also serve as important, tangible feedback that helps students discover an intrinsic love of reading and learning within themselves.

To be successful, learners must ultimately be driven by their own desire to discover the world and expand their understanding of it. But we must be aware that the desire to learn must first grow out of a child's self-discovery, a process that involves the information she receives from the world around her. The information provided by learning information systems such as Accelerated Reader can be an invaluable tool for giving students the external feedback that helps them develop the internal drive to learn.

Ultimately, the classroom educator must determine what types of motivators will benefit his students. The cause of excellence in education, and of a more just society, is best served by a balanced approach toward learning motivation that supports the professional judgment of classroom teachers.

For more information, or for additional copies of this report, write or call:

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